



# ***La serva padrona:*** **Historical Background**

Though a short intermezzo, *La serva padrona* (*The Maid as Mistress*) sparked a controversy which would greatly influence the development of *opéra comique* and French opera. Based on a play by Jacopo Angello Nelli, *La serva padrona* was written in 1731 by composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi and librettist\* Gennaro Antonio Federico as an intermezzo, a short comedic piece to fill the intermission of Pergolesi's full serious opera *Il prigioniero superbo* (*The Proud Prisoner*). Although initial audience reception was cool, when *La serva padrona* was coupled with *Acis et Galatée* (a full opera by Lully) in 1752, it received much more recognition.

*La serva padrona* was one of several operas performed in Paris in the early 1750s by an Italian *opera buffa* troupe. This style of Italian comic opera created a divide amongst opera-goers: those who liked the new Italian *opera buffa*, and those that preferred the traditional French lyric opera. This divide was known as *La Querelle des Bouffons* ("the war of the comic actors") and was a source of great contention. It initiated a flurry of pamphlet making called the Pamphlet War\*\*, each side of the debate eager to convince readers of the merits of their preferred style. The Pamphlet War allowed many people to contribute to the discussion and facilitated the distribution of ideas in a public forum.

Adding to the controversy was the subject matter. *La serva padrona* tells the story of a defiant servant who eventually marries her master and becomes the mistress of the household. The opera demonstrated pro-revolutionary ideas as the question of class structure would be of great importance during the French revolution, later in the 18th century.

*La Querelle des Bouffons* lasted approximately two years until French society became accustomed to the Italian style, due to the performance of several other comic operas from 1752-1754, some using music by Pergolesi. The Italian comic opera was here to stay.

## **Pamphlet War vs. Twitter War?:**

How would this type of public debate happen today? What form of social media would be used in place of pamphlets? Do you think social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) is an appropriate medium for important discussion? What is different about having a written debate vs. one face to face? Does the choice of medium change anything?

### **\*Librettist:**

The individual who writes the text of an opera. A composer sets this to music. Sometimes the composer is also the librettist for an opera.

### **\*\*Pamphlet War:**

The Pamphlet War was a battle of sorts where pamphlets were used by all sides of a controversy to sway public opinion. Pamphlets were a popular form of publication during the 18<sup>th</sup> century because they allowed authors to express their thoughts simply and anonymously to a wide audience. They were easy to produce, could be distributed for little to no money and were a means of responding rapidly to current events or contribute to public debate.

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